

## 2. Faith and Faithfulness

The consideration of faith and sight provides insight into the nature of true faith and the distinction between it and what people instinctively call faith. Natural faith can be just as sincere, informed, consistent, fervent and unwavering as the faith presented and lauded in the Scripture. In fact, the two kinds of faith are, in most respects, indistinguishable; the only determinative difference is their relation to self and God – not any “god,” but the God embodied in Jesus Christ and revealed by the Spirit. Human beings are fully capable of believing in deity – even the God of the Bible. What they cannot do is escape from themselves; even with respect to the true God, all people are constrained to perceive, judge and relate to Him through the grid of their own minds. Thus it is the renewal of a person’s mind that determines the authenticity of his faith, and this why Paul could insist that faith is a divine bestowment (Ephesians 2:8-9; cf. John 6:22-45, 10:22-29).

But once the nature of true faith is established, the next step is to consider its functionality – how authentic faith operates when it is true to itself. The best way to approach this task is in terms of the relationship between faith and faithfulness.

- a. Most Christians recognize that the concepts of faith and faithfulness are related, even as they share the same linguistic root in both Greek and Hebrew. In general, though, faith and faithfulness tend to be distinguished along *cognitive* versus *behavioral* lines. That is, faith is seen as pertaining to a person’s belief, whereas faithfulness pertains to his conduct. Faith is thus treated as an internal activity of the mind, while faithfulness is external, having to do with words and actions. Commonly, this inward/outward dynamic is expressed in terms of faithfulness being the external fruit of faith: People who *have* faith *act* faithfully.
- b. While there is some truth in this formulation, it falls short because it is too narrow and simplistic. Faith and faithfulness are inseparable, but not fundamentally in the cause-and-effect manner stated above. Their connection also goes beyond linguistic features. Faith and faithfulness are bound together by the same fundamental connotation: They both speak to a trust-shaped relationship.

*“The difference between the concepts [faith and faithfulness] is minimized by a more relational framework. While the English terms are typically used to describe a person’s or group’s character and mental orientation, the biblical terms are typically applied to people in relationship. The biblical concept of faith/faithfulness stands at the heart of the relationship between the God of the Bible and his people, a relationship which, in its essential bi-polarity, is intensely personal, dynamic, and multi-form.”* (New Dictionary of Biblical Theology)

This statement highlights a couple of significant factors respecting faith:

- 1) First and foremost, it stresses that both faith and faithfulness are *relational* concepts rather than intellectual, moral, ethical, or behavioral ones. And the primary relationship they pertain to is the one between God and men.

- 2) Secondly, the divine-human relationship at the heart of faith and faithfulness implicates God as much as men (it is *bi-polar*) and is dynamic and multi-faceted (it is *multi-form*).

These characteristics show that faith and faithfulness cannot be limited to humans and human beliefs and practices. They pertain as much to *God's* convictions and actions as to men's. They also show that faith and faithfulness are organic and comprehensive; so far from pertaining only to a set of beliefs and religious behaviors, they speak to the totality of a person's existence as a human being.

- c. And if faith and faithfulness pertain to the divine-human relationship and encompass the entirety of one's existence, it follows that they are implicated in the concept of *righteousness*. This is exactly what the Scripture indicates – with respect to God and His righteousness as much as to men and theirs:

**God's** faithfulness speaks to His unwavering commitment to His purposes as articulated and ratified in covenantal (relational) structures. *And this faithfulness is precisely God's righteousness – His integrity of character and conduct.*

- From the Scripture's vantage point, God is righteous because He is committed to what is **right**; and "*right*" is *determined, not by a moral standard per se, but by God's purposes for the world* (Isaiah 44:21-46:13, 50:7-8; note especially the relationship between Yahweh's righteousness and His *salvation* (deliverance) in Isaiah 51-54; cf. also Psalm 40:1-10, 51:1-19, 71:1-19, 98:1-9; Isaiah 45:1-46:13, 59:1-60:6, 61:1-62:12).
- God is righteous – He conforms to righteousness – by being faithful to His covenanted purposes and their accomplishment just as He devised, revealed and pledged them (cf. Nehemiah 9:7-8; Isaiah 42:1-13, 45:1-46:13, 56:1 with Romans 3:1-4, 21-22, 15:8-9).

So **men's** faith and faithfulness constitute the appropriate – the *righteous* – human response to God's faithfulness (His righteousness).

- Isaiah 51:1-8 illustrates this by highlighting that human righteousness amounts to holding fast to God's righteousness – not His moral character as such, but His faithfulness to fulfill His restorative purposes bound up in Abraham and His covenant with him. Human righteousness consists in the faith/faithfulness of a life ordered by the person's resolute confidence in God's faithfulness to accomplish what He has committed Himself to.
- Thus the maxim of Habakkuk 2:4 in which God commended as "righteous" those who bind themselves to (trust in) His faithfulness. Though destruction and exile were coming to Judah, He would yet fulfill His promises to Abraham and his seed; the ruin of David's house and kingdom would not be the last word (cf. 1:1-2:3 with 3:1-2 and 3:16-19).

The intimate relationship between faith, faithfulness and righteousness is reinforced by linguistic features. The most common word form for belief/faith in the Old Testament (the Hebrew form behind the English term *amen*) carries the idea of upholding or certifying something (or someone) as true, hence the corollary concepts of sureness and steadfastness (cf. Psalm 19:7, 111:7 with Genesis 15:6; Exodus 4:1-5, 14:31, 19:9, etc.; also Deuteronomy 27:15-26). As it pertains to God, this term highlights His *veracity* and *covenant integrity*: He's the God who never wavers from His purposes and promises, the God who "keeps covenant" and so "keeps faith" by "doing the truth" (cf. Deuteronomy 7:9 with 2 Chronicles 6:14-17; Isaiah 25:1, 49:1-7, 55:3; cf. also the prayers of Nehemiah (9:1-33) and Daniel (9:1-19)).

This finds a parallel in human faith/faithfulness. Again, faith speaks to a certain way of being human. *Faith is lending one's own "amen" to God's; it is "keeping faith/faithfulness" as God does.* God is faithful to accomplish all that He has promised and men are to conform themselves to His faithfulness *just as He does*: He binds Himself to His word and so must His image-sons. They must be faithful as He is faithful, righteous as He is righteous (cf. Deuteronomy 5-11, 28-30 with Psalm 12:1, 78:1-8, 101:6; Isaiah 1:21-26; Jeremiah 11:1-5; etc.).

### 3. Faith and Faithfulness in the Old Testament

The above considerations reveal the inseparability of faith and faithfulness and show that they don't pertain to religious beliefs and practices per se, but to the way human beings are to live in relation to the true God who has purposed and promised and is faithful. This was just as true in the preparatory salvation history (recorded in the Old Testament) as in the time of fulfillment which has come in Jesus the Messiah.

- a. Because the Scripture treats him as the prototypical man of faith, *Abraham* is the appropriate starting point for considering the Old Testament "faithful." And the Scripture reveals that Abraham's faith wasn't his belief in a certain divine being, but his unwavering confidence that this deity who had covenanted with him would keep His word. So the axiomatic statement of Abraham's faith reflected his confident trust that he, though an old man with a barren wife and no heir, would have innumerable offspring just as the Lord pledged to him (Genesis 15:1-6).
- b. This pattern continued with Abraham's descendents as they, too, were obliged to trust their covenant God and order their lives accordingly (ref. Genesis 26:1-25, 28:1-22, 32:1-30; also 15:1-21 with Exodus 3:1-10, 4:19-23, 6:1-8, 19:1-8). Israel's obedience – and therefore its righteousness – consisted in its faithfulness to the covenant at Sinai which prescribed its sonship and calling as the Abrahamic "seed." (Hence God treated law-breaking as relational infidelity – cf. Deuteronomy 31:14-16; Isaiah 1:1-21; Jeremiah 3:1-11; Ezekiel 16, 23; Hosea 1:1-2:13). Yahweh would prove righteous – He would "keep faith" according to the covenant, but His elect "son" had the same obligation of faithfulness; Israel was to trust and follow after the One who had promised (Hebrews 11).

c. The concepts of faith and faithfulness (and their relation to righteousness) reach their greatest and most important Old Testament expression in regard to the *Messiah*. This is because both the divine and human dimensions of these concepts converge in Him: *The Old Testament scriptures present Messiah as the embodiment of both Israel and Yahweh Himself*; He is the true son, servant, disciple and witness and also Yahweh returned to Zion to judge, redeem and restore. As the “yea and amen” of Yahweh’s purposes and promises (2 Corinthians 1:20), the Messiah would embody in Himself the full extent and quintessential expression of the righteousness of faith and faithfulness.

- He would do so as *Yahweh* keeping His oath to return to His covenant habitation and restore His people and their inheritance, thereby “keeping faith” and fulfilling all righteousness (cf. Psalm 98; Isaiah 40:1-11, 42:1-9, 46:12-13, 51:1-8, 59:1-60:3; Jeremiah 23:1-8; Daniel 9; Zephaniah 3; Zechariah 2, 8-9, 14; Malachi 3:1; etc., with Romans 3:21-22).
- But Messiah would also fulfill the righteousness of faith/faithfulness by embodying Israel in Himself and fulfilling Israel’s identity and calling as the Abrahamic seed. He would fully conform to the covenant obligation of faithful sonship, thereby fulfilling Israel’s righteousness, not only for the sake of Israel, but also on behalf of the whole world (cf. Isaiah 42:1-13, 45:1-13 (Cyrus as prototypical *messiah*), 49:1-13; also Jeremiah 23:1-8, 33:1-26, 50:1-7; cf. also Romans 15:8-12; Galatians 3:16).

The great story of the Old Testament scriptures is the story of *God* as well as the story of Israel. The salvation history recorded in the Old Testament isn’t an account of a sovereign God moving the game pieces of providence around according to an abstract design to “glorify” Himself. God isn’t merely the author of the story; *He is its main character*. The salvation history is God’s story in that it unfolds His loving design for His creation and the way He would accomplish it.

- It is the story of a devoted Father betrayed by His son, and yet resolute in His determination to end the alienation between Himself and His son and reconcile and restore him – and the dominion given to him – to Himself.
- It is the story of this faithful God taking a people to Himself – Abraham and his seed – as the instrument of His reconciling and restoring work. God would accomplish His goal for man, His uniquely loved image-son, and the creation he presides over, but He would do so through man.
- It is the story of a faithful covenant Husband who showed Himself true to His chosen people and His purposes in and through them, though they proved themselves unfaithful and unable to fulfill their calling on behalf of the world. Yet their faithlessness would not override or negate His faithfulness; He would prevail by embodying Israel, the covenant son, in Himself and, by His own faithfulness, fulfilling Israel’s calling (Isaiah 59).